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Reading and Writing Index

Cixous

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Reading and Writing

Index Cixous

Reflections on Creative Writing Research
in the Academy

Joanne Dixon

ABSTRACT

This article presents a creative-critical discussion of creative writing research in the academy. It describes a multimodal research practice that employs a range of materials, technologies, and modes of reading and writing – creative, critical, and creative-critical. In addition, it reflects on being a scholar-practitioner and on the relationship between rigour and research. The nexus of the article is a creative-critical multimodal reading and writing of *Index Cixous: Cix Pax* (2005), a wordless book of photographs taken by Roni Horn of French writer Hélène Cixous. Through encounters with Horn's book, creative writing research is presented as an example of Nicholas Royle's concept of veering (2011), while also exploring its intersection with the writings of Cixous, particularly those texts concerned with seeing, not-seeing and myopia – the focus of an emerging post-doctoral research project. The poetry film presented here is a manifestation of how creative writing research might veer between different modes and media and foster “besideness” to offer new insights into lived experiences of myopia.

Preface

This article begins with “Index”: a finger used to point out an alphabetical list, the end at the beginning, a beginning at the end, or what might be a poem. A poem that scrolls in the sidebar, a slow animation marking the breath before and after each word. An index for a book of photographs: *Index Cixous: Cix Pax* (Horn 2005) and a poetry film, “Thumb Cinema.” A veering reference to creative writing research as creative-critical veering. Nicholas Royle (2011) explains how veering is a particular way of reading and encountering literature, or even a theory of literature. Veering means to turn and diverge, to alter course, to pass from one state or position to another, and in its nautical context, it means to let out or slacken a rope or line. Veering can be intentional or unintentional. Royle suggests “[i]t is as much a question of losing as of trying to keep control” (2011: 74). This article is a series of intentional and unintentional movements that first began in response to a call. [1] A series of intentional and unintentional movements between different modes of creative and critical reading and writing, and different modes of address. A series of intentional and unintentional movements between materials and technologies: book, text, photographs, e-book, pencil, pen, post-it notes, keyboard, mouse, PowerPoint, projector, voice recorder, smartphone, video – a “kind of speedy, savvy weaving between screens and applications and inputs and outputs” (Barnard 2019: 2).

Barnard’s description of a “savvy weaving” is worthy of a veer. Adjective and verb evoke the practice of creative writing research in the academy as, in Royle’s words, a “swerving, interweaving, sudden turning between/within one register or tone and another, between/within one genre or discourse and another” (2011: 69). Looking back at us, we see a researcher who is knowledgeable, experienced, and shrewd in the action of weaving. She is forming and fabricating, interlacing a web. Her movements are as intricate as the steps in a dance, threading through and round. She entwines threads, forms text and texture. As Roland Barthes explains in *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973):

Text means Tissue: but whereas hitherto we have always taken this tissue as a product, a ready-made veil, behind which lies, more or less hidden, meaning (truth), we are now emphasizing, in the tissue, the generative idea that the text is made, is worked out in perpetual interweaving. (1975: 64)

Barthes’ re-emphasis of what a text might be offers two ways of reading: one involves a passive lifting of the veil onto meaning and truth, the other is an active process of continual making and working out. Barthes’ preference for the latter resonates with how we might read and produce texts, and with what takes place in creative writing research. Principally, this involves working at the intersection of creative and critical modes of reading and writing, writing poetry and prose, and connecting with both print and visual media, for example artwork and poetry films.

Index
animate
before
beside
blank page
blank verse
blindness
book
Cixous, Hélène
dark

father
eye
flipbook
fold
fore finger
glasses
hands
hidden
Horn, Roni
leaf

photographs
not-seeing
Picasso, Pablo
play
primitive
recto
refraction
Savoir
space
secret

veil
unseen
version
verso
vision
Woman Ironing
wordless
words
writing

descent
distraction
drawing
ekphrasis
elsewhere
encounter

meteor
moorings
mother
myopia
naked
night

seen
skin
slantwards
spine
thumb
unfolding

This movement “between/within” (Royle 2011: 69) genres and technologies is comparable to Barnard’s description of a “multimodal writing practice” (2019: 6). What follows is one manifestation of the continual making and working out of a multimodal creative writing research practice: a working out in three parts that includes a discussion of what it means to be a creative writing researcher; an example of a multimodal creative writing research practice; a reflection on *rigour* and *research* in relation to that practice; and a poetry film. Barnard explains that “internal multimodality” is “all the mental work (conscious and unconscious) that a writer does before operationalising any medium” (2019: 6). This article aims to uncover some of that mental work.

1. On Being a Creative Writing Researcher

Jen Webb offers the moniker “artist-academic” (2012: 2) as a “catch-all to refer to those creative practitioners who are employed in universities as teachers and researchers within one of the art disciplines” (2012: 14). Does this catch us all? As creative writers in the academy we are not quite caught – after all writer and artist are distinct and distinctive. However, when Emily Orley, practising artist and lecturer in Drama Theatre and Performance Studies, uses the descriptor “scholar-practitioner” (2009: 159), we might be hooked into the day-to-day thinking and doing of our practice. Yet it still seems to be a matter of deciding who leads in this pairing. As scholar-practitioners, our relationship with the practice of creative writing is altered, particularly in relation to our connections with the writing world beyond the university. Reporting on the emergence of artistic research in art academies in the Nordic region, Ane Hjort Guttu warns of an “academic feel that may eventually cause [that research] to become unmoored and drift away from the rest of the art world” (2020: np). Guttu adds that there are real risks in “over-production” and dissemination of research in the form of results to “closed forums” which are predominantly academic (2020: np). In writing this article for an academic journal there is already a disconnect between the creative writing it contains and the wider writing world. More worryingly, Orley suggests that there is an inherent dilemma in trying to combine the two roles of researcher and creative writer: “how to produce rigorous scholarly research about artistic practices without losing all the creative and imaginative impulses behind the work” (2009: 159). The implication of Orley’s statement is unsettling, suggesting as it does that research has the potential to

drain the lifeblood from our creative practice.

Jeri Kroll offers another way: “[i]n its most innovative form creative writing research can be [...] rhizomatic, in the sense first elaborated in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus*.” (2013: 117) Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophy suggests an alternative way of thinking and knowing through the form of the rhizome, a subterranean horizontal plant stem system. The rhizome, we are told by Deleuze and Guattari, “connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature [...] It has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (*milieu*) from which it grows and overflows.” (1988 2020: 21-22) Importantly, with reference to how the orchid “forms a map with the wasp, in a rhizome”, Deleuze and Guattari stress how the rhizome “fosters connections between fields”, adding how it can be “open and connectable in all of its dimensions; [...] detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification” and “always has multiple entryways” (Deleuze and Guattari 1988 2020: 12). Taking a rhizomatic approach, creative writing research in the academy is characterised by multiple, non-hierarchical entrance and exit points, be they creative, critical, or a fusion of all of these. This means privileging neither the creative nor critical elements of a project as ways of knowing and writing. Thus, creative writing research becomes “mak[ing] rhizomes [...] grow[ing] off shoots” (1988 2020: 26) of creative and critical writing and creative-critical writing across a range of modes.

A rhizomatic approach to practice-based research is recognisable in many Creative Writing PhDs, which often include both creative work and a variety of critical writing borrowed from other disciplines, for example, “critical analysis, theoretical methodologies, literary history, ethnography” (Neale 2019: 49). Creative Writing PhD theses in the UK range from those that comprise creative work with contiguous critical writing underpinned by a rhizomatic methodology [2] to more innovative artefacts that present one hybrid text. [3] However, notwithstanding the form of the final output, creative practice is still, as Neale suggests, “the central research method in the discipline” (2019: 49). In fact, any creative work in a practice-based doctoral project can be said to be the research itself. Nicholas Davey (2006), reflecting on the relationship between art theory and art practice, describes this as “the individual concretisation of what is

grasped” (2006: 25), going on to explain that “when an artwork speaks it does so because it lights up or actualises various circuitries of meaning which have informed it” (2006: 33-4). [4] Davey frames art practice as the research itself; this framing is gaining ground continually in creative writing doctoral projects. For creative writers in the academy the picture is less certain. The wording of the Research Excellence Framework 2021 (REF2021) concedes that “It is *anticipated* that the research will *normally* be evident within the submitted “book” and that *no additional information is required*. Novels and poetry collections should be submitted in this category.”[5] (2019b: 93) Yet the language here is not definitive: “anticipated” and “normally” introduce doubt, and what does it mean to be “evident”? Unsurprisingly, many institutions and creative writers in the academy are cautious in light of this tentative language in relation to the status of creative work being submitted to REF2021. As a result, creative writing practitioners are still expected to provide this “additional information” and colleagues are grappling with how – and why – they should “[make] clear the[ir] research process / content / contribution” (2019b: 93). In “No additional information required,” Andrew Cowan notes how there remains a “separation between the practice itself and its supplementary articulation for the purposes of the academic audit” (2020: 4). Despite this, Cowan’s article is an enlightening read, and offers some hope for creative writers in the academy. With the permission of Professor Birch – a member of REF Panel D in 2014, and the Chair of Panel D in 2021 – Cowan reports on the contents of an internal guidance document which stresses that research should be recognised as being embodied in the work. [6]

The sense of separation identified by Cowan feels familiar, and is reinforced by thinking of ourselves as scholar-practitioners. In one sense this apparently apt label is paradoxically an illustration of Webb’s description of a “bifurcation of practice” – a division or branching into two practices – that results in a “double-burden” (2012: 3). Undoubtedly, in its search for prestige, students, and income, the academy imposes a doubly heavy load: a scholar-practitioner should be both successful writer and successful researcher. From the Latin *bi* meaning two, and *furcatus* meaning forked, we are involved in a two-forked process, creative and critical, probing with both prongs simultaneously, seemingly each prong following a parallel but different path. And yet when

the hyphen – from the Greek *hupo* meaning under, and *hein* meaning one – steps in between these two practices: scholar and practitioner, creative and the critical practices are brought together *under one*: the scholar-practitioner can take on a different shape. Looking more closely, to fork means to divide into branches and to divaricate (L -*varicāre*) – to stretch, spread apart, branch off, divide, to stretch asunder, to straddle. And now our creative writing research is opening wide. It is forking away, and like corn, it is sprouting. It is forking up, digging, raising, moving. It is forking out, giving up and handing over, and from the Scottish, it is looking out, striving for something.

2. Reading and Writing *Index Cixous* – an emerging multimodal creative writing research practice

Royle begins Chapter 6 of *Veering: A Theory of Literature* (2011) with the memory of his deceased mother chastising him lovingly for never knowing which way her son will jump, echoing her voice with an aphorism: “No writing (critical or creative) without jumping: jump start, jumping off, jumping ship.” (Royle 2011: 67) And it is also where this account of reading and writing *Index Cixous* begins, by jumping ship, veering back to 6 May 2020, 9.20am. [7]

*Transcripts from Samsung Smartphone
Voice Recorder
(with musical directions translated from
the Italian)*

#1 [wind – always; birds – at will]

for the first time I’m recording my thoughts while walking [Wordsworth – in an undertone], speaking them out loud while veering from one side of the pavement to the other, from one side of the road to the other [engine – with vigour], veering to keep two metres apart, veering to keep away from others, veering so that I have no contact, and what about those who refuse to veer? who hold their line no matter what? veer to touch [bird – playfully], veer to encounter, veer to avoid encounter, to avoid being beside or next to, to avoid touching or breathing each other’s space, but this intentional veering, this imposed veering [bird – carrying one note into the next] is an accident, one veering leads to another,

[footsteps – fast and with animation] on Dunster Road a young girl doing hill sprints passes me and walks back down the hill [dog – loudly; engine – loudly], I veer away from the cat [dog – loudly; engine – dying away], at the corner with Stamford I want to visit friends, veering has been stopped, I depend on veering [bird – with movement], and for the first time I'm *walking-veering-writing*, veering from one mode of practice to another [bird – bouncing the bow on the string], I am allowed to exercise once a day, I *walk-veer-write* from one path to another, avoiding encounters and contacts, finding encounters and contact, by the allotments veering to hear-see [birds – syncopated; hawthorn – trembling], at the time of this *walking-veering-writing* we are in lockdown

#2 [veering – continue without a pause]

Veering underpins this emerging creative writing research sparked by *Index Cixous*, a series of photographs of writer and philosopher Hélène Cixous taken by American artist Roni Horn. The photographs are presented without text and interspersed with blank pages. Some of the portraits are black and white, others colour, but exclusively each image is severed at the top of Cixous's breastbone to reveal a frame of coarse grey-black, close-cropped hair around a lined forehead, black arching eyebrows, deep brown eyes shaped with kohl, an aquiline nose, painted lips and, sometimes, the slope of her naked shoulders.

Eric Prenowitz has described Horn's book as a "remarkable portrait of Cixous's writing, looking both ways at once," but he also asks a question that preoccupies many writers working at the boundaries of creative and critical writing, "what is it that a book is?" (2006: xxiii) Prenowitz encourages us to read Horn's book through a series of pathways, rather than straight through from the first page to the last. He suggests veering our gaze between and within different groups of photographs, for example, "a series of successive images [...] interrupted by a blank page, a series of recto images [...] interrupted by a blank page [...]" (2006: xxii), and so on. Prenowitz wonders whether in fact *Index Cixous* is asking "What is one? And two? And three? What is a whole? Where does a thing or a chapter or a work

stop and another begin?" (2006: xxii) In raising these questions about the nature of the book itself, Prenowitz foregrounds the unseen relationships beyond the photographs, concluding that this book "is all about double unities, divided wholes, one-tuos" (2006: xiii). Royle suggests something similar about veering: "Veering is the diversion of the one. It is divisibility itself, divisibility of word, direction and address." (Royle 2011: 77)

These questions are evident also in a range of contemporary hybrid writing that challenges the boundaries of form. For example, Royle's own novel *An English Guide to Birdwatching* (2017), pointedly labelled by the publisher on the front cover as "A NOVEL," veers between registers and modes of address, including a story of "fakery" and "thievery" pertaining to a manuscript on gulls (Royle 2017: 155), the ambitions of a young journalist and his didactic essays on literary culture, and a lyric reflection on the main story and our relationship with birds through a section titled "The Hides." "Hide 1" begins: "Things move as soon as one speaks." (Royle 2017: 227) This sense of movement in language and form is also captured in texts such as *The Argonauts* (2016) by Maggie Nelson and Nuar Alsadir's hybrid work *Fourth Person Singular* (2017). Alsadir's writing moves between lineated poetry, prose poetry, lyric essay, aphorism, quotation, fragment, association, footnote, and marginalia. On the opening page, the line "Shots of sidebar and awe—" (Alsadir 2017: 1) foreshadows a veering reading experience that points to what we might find in the spaces alongside and in between the main text.

Writing that positions itself on and around such thresholds is nothing new, as Stephen Benson and Clare Connors point out in *Creative Criticism* (2014). This comprehensive anthology and guide collects together examples of creative-critical writing from Roland Barthes to Anne Carson to Denise Riley to Ali Smith to Sarah Wood. In *Creative Criticism*, Benson and Connors are also concerned by the idea of wholeness and remind us that when we're "really close to something, [we] don't see it whole," describing instead how we "love [a text or book] to bits, or become particularly fixated on a bit of it" and "see it from odd angles, or see how it relates to other things" (2014: 4). For example, Sarah Wood's essay "Anew Again" (2007) anthologised in *Creative Criticism* (2014: 278-292) begins with a fixation on a photograph, Pablo Picasso's *Construction au jouer de guitare, 1913* (Benson and Connors 2014: 279).

Wood tells us, “Facing me is a photograph of what I cannot see” (278).

This creative writing research practice is fixated on photographs of what cannot be seen. As Cixous’s eyes fluctuate through different degrees of openness in Horn’s photographs, gazing at a blank page or an image of herself on adjacent leaves, she seems to be speaking about what might be seen and unseen, the topic also of her essay, “Savoir” (Cixous 1998 2001: 3-16). Published in *Veils*, alongside Derrida’s “A Silkworm of One’s Own,” “Saviour” is an oblique autobiographical text that explores experiences of myopia — from the Greek *myein* meaning to shut and *ōp* meaning eyes — or short-sightedness. In other words, seeing and not-seeing. Cixous’s essay begins in the third person, describing an unnamed woman’s experience of this condition, one that many of us share: “Myopia was her fault [...] her imperceptible native veil” (1998 2001: 3). This innate invisible veil, and the weakness the narrator claims responsibility for, obscures the world, making it unknown, creating an unsettling uncertainty and sense of peril. Cixous tells us that “[f]rom then on she did not know. She and Doubt were always inseparable [...]. She never saw safely. Seeing was a tottering believing. Everything was perhaps. Living was in a state of alert.” (1998 2001: 6) It is at this point in the essay, when Cixous suddenly switches to first person, that we realise we too have been seeing, or reading, through a veil:

Running headlong to her mother she remained in the possibility of error until the last second. And what if her mother were suddenly not her mother when she got to her face? The pain of not having recognized that the unknown woman could not be my mother, the shame of taking an unknown for the known par excellence, did blood not shout out or feel? (1998 2001: 6)

The subtle shift to the first-person perspective at “my” alters our understanding of the protagonist, who now we identify as Cixous herself. We are shaken, what we think we know is wavering, we have lost our footing. We come to realise that we do not know who the woman is. The essay continues to slip between first, third and sometimes second person until tellingly, Cixous states: “This woman was another and you did not know it” (1998 2001: 7).

Reflecting on the writing process in *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing* (1993) Cixous suggests that as writers we “must be able to reach this lightening region that takes your breath away, where you *instantaneously* feel at sea and where the moorings are severed with the already-written, the already-known.” (1993: 59) This unmooring permeates Cixous’s own writing in “Savoir” and this creative writing research practice. After the woman’s myopia is reversed by surgery, as Cixous’s own myopia was, the essay explores the relationship between knowing, seeing, not-seeing, not-knowing, and her new-found ability. Although the woman is now able to “see” without her glasses and revels in the joy of that, she is also distrustful of the “miracle”, as she labels it, of “*seeing-with-the-naked-eye*” (1998 2001: 9). Yet as the essay continues her restored eyesight becomes a cause of distress and she takes to mourning the loss of “not-seeing” or the “blur, the chaos before the genesis, the interval, the stage, the deadening, the belonging to non-seeing, the silent heaviness, the daily frontier-crossing, the wandering in limbo” (1998 2001: 12-13). The woman longs for her former way of seeing. The not-knowing, characteristic of not-seeing, is in fact desirable and towards the end of the essay the woman defiantly declares: “I shall always hesitate. I shall not leave my people. I belong to the people of those who do not see” (1998 2001: 13). Not-seeing becomes a gift and allows a different kind of knowing, knowing through uncertainty. Moreover, in another work, *Rootprints: Memory and Life Writing* (1997), Cixous stresses the importance of her own myopia to her writing, explaining that she is unable to see and write without myopia. She describes how her “extreme nearsightedness” blurs the world around her, amplifying an uncertainty that becomes “above all the need – indissociable from [her] very nature, from [her] way of seeing and thus of thinking – to go see everything very very close up *so as to see*.” (Cixous 1997: 89) This creative writing research practice is fixating, fixating on seeing and not-seeing, and beginning to explore how to read and write the texts that are loved. It is thinking about knowing, uncertainty and veering, and about how creative writing research intertwines text and texture, image and words, text and screen, beginning to work through what it means to live, read and write with myopia.

In “Writing Blind: Conversation with the Donkey” (1996), Cixous offers another veer: write by distraction. Cixous describes writing as “a departure, an embarkation” where the “moorings are broken”

(1996 2005: 184-5). By closing both ear and eye to the “political world”, Cixous experiences an “Elsewhere”, an unconscious “primitive space” and “do[es] not resist the forces that carry [her] off” (1996 2005: 185). Similarly, this creative writing research fixates on texts, images, experiences while embracing distraction. This fixation-distraction also concerns the notion of being beside an artwork and the importance of reading and writing as an encounter. In their introduction to *The Creative Critic: Writing as/about Practice* (2018), Katja Hilevaara and Emily Orley evoke Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s notion of “besideness.” During the scripted dialogue that makes up this innovative creative-critical introduction they suggest that:

the act of being beside an artwork is not about uncovering something other in the work but rather about allowing space and time to encounter it (whether it is your own creation or someone else’s). (Hilevaara and Orley 2018: 8)

Through these two words, beside and encounter, this researcher reads and writes *Index Cixous* and “Savoir.” When she is beside these texts, they are neither below nor above her, but they are side by side, on the same level. She is close by. She is near. And in their encounter, they meet face to face. They fall in together. She loves them to bits. Yet Sedgwick warns us that “besideness” involves a “wide range of desiring, identifying, representing, repelling, paralleling, differentiating, rivalling, leaning, twisting, mimicking, withdrawing, attracting, aggressing, warping and other relations” (2003: 8) – these relations are not necessarily straightforward or comfortable.

In her essay, “Without end, no, State of Drawing, no rather: The Executioner’s Taking Off” (1991), Cixous speaks of just such an uncomfortable encounter with an artwork, one foregrounded by the unease displayed in her veering essay title. In this essay, Cixous is violently affected by Picasso’s preliminary pencil sketch for a painting later titled *Woman Ironing*. Cixous describes her encounter as a “needle blow right to the middle of eternity’s chest. But in order to pull the needle out, to strike the blow, one had to scribble furiously.” (1991 2005: 33) Admitting that it is a struggle but a necessity, Cixous describes how writing the encounter, or what might be called “besideness”, is a matter of doing what is right. Cixous tells us she “want[ed] to write what passes between us and the Woman Ironing, the electric

current of it.” (1991 2005: 34) Using Benson and Connors’s description of creative criticism, Cixous is “seek[ing] to do justice to what can happen - does happen; will happen; might or might not happen - when [she is] with an artwork” (2014: 5). As a scholar-practitioner beside Horn’s artwork, *Index Cixous*, “Saviour” and Cixous’s other works, this creative writing research seeks to do justice to the encounter.

The poetry film that concludes this section, and is indexed in the preface, is a manifestation of the imaginative veering and multimodal processes used to read and write an encounter with *Index Cixous*. It is cross-pollinated by creative and critical reading and writing, artwork, and digital media, and occupies the blurred and uncertain spaces between creative and critical practices. It is a “savvy weaving” (Barnard 2019: 2) of materials and technologies, a multimodal practice that is beginning to interrogate representations of myopia and reveals some of the “inter-relationships between and among [this] writer’s decisions and different media and modes” (Barnard 2019: 6). On this indeterminate, unsettling journey there will always be other voices with us, infiltrating our writing and opening us up to new perspectives:

- Did you say something?
- I heard a voice.
- In your head?
- No, in yours. (Royle, 2003: 106)

In his critical reading of *Index Cixous*, Prenowitz discloses that Horn’s wordless book “contains quasi-cinematic sequences which unfold in linear narratives as one turns (or flips!) the pages.” (2006: xxii) Like the flipbooks you might find as prizes in a cereal box or Christmas cracker, or the ones you might have made as a child, you can flip the leaves of *Index Cixous* with your thumb, transforming what you see. It becomes a *Daumenkino* (from the German, *Daumen*, meaning thumb, and *kino* meaning cinema), a flipbook that animates and blurs Cixous’s eyes and lips, capturing her silent words in a smartphone and on the page: <https://www.joannedixon.co.uk/> [8]

3. Rigour and Research

But is this research? And how can this be *rigorous* research? According to the Research Excellence Framework 2021 (REF 2021), *rigour*, alongside *originality* and *significance*, should define the quality of any outputs: “The sub-panels will assess the quality of submitted research outputs in terms of their ‘originality, significance and rigour’” (REF 2019a: 7). This seemingly fixed backdrop establishes the scene. Research and rigour appear, at first, an uncomfortable pairing. From the French *rechercher* (*re-* meaning back or again; *-cercher* meaning to seek), research encourages us to look repeatedly for something with care, to examine, and re-examine. Simon Piasecki describes research as a “mapping exercise, when we consider that it operates on the basis of asking questions that relate to our gaps in understanding.” (2018: 218)

The creative writing practice research undertaken in relation to *Index Cixous* is beginning to ask what we understand by seeing “well” and “badly,” specifically myopically, in the context of a Western tradition that places sight at the heart of understanding the external world. It seeks to rethink the binary opposition of the functioning and mal-functioning eye common in representations of myopia. This is an urgent concern. Myopia is the most common eye disorder across the world (Wu et al, 2019) and studies show that it is a widespread and increasing global healthcare concern (Holden et al, 2016). More people than ever are living with myopia in a society characterised, in Bolt’s words, by “mass or institutionalised endorsement of visual necessity” (2016: 5): seeing is equated with knowing, a connection that is made figuratively in phrases we use day-to-day. After all, “seeing is believing.” At the same time, elective laser eye surgery, such as that undergone by Cixous in her later life, has increased in popularity – seeing well without displaying the outward signs of myopia, such as the apparatus of glasses, is gaining ground (Shah & Dua 2000: 395). A creative writing practice research that interrogates blurring and indeterminacy, that operates on the boundaries of the creative and the critical, and that travels between modes, can provide fruitful ways of understanding lived experiences of myopia.

If we look again at the word “research,” with the exactitude and precision demanded by rigorous research, we discover the roots of research (*-cercher*) in the Latin *circare*, meaning to go about, to wander, to traverse, and we are veering again.

Research is veering. But how might rigour be part of these movements? The OED tells us rigour means immovability, rigidity, even a harsh or cruel inflexibility, and though now obsolete, a hardness of heart. We are disheartened. John Wood’s analysis of rigour as an aspect of research excellence casts the term in a similarly poor light (“In the Cultivation of Research Excellence, is Rigour a No-Brainer?” 2012). For Wood, rigour appears as “a scrawny, ill-defined creature that exercises its power through fear and supposition,” not unlike the shuffling zombie of Michael Jackson’s “Thriller” video (2012: 14). He questions whether it is a useful term for “encouraging best practice” (2012: 14).

These images are hard to recognise in a creative writing research practice that is a living, breathing, veering entity. Like the privileging of sight as a way of knowing, the privileging of rigour in research also excludes other ways of knowing. In fact, Wood suggests that rigour is not necessarily an indication of excellence and warns of the stasis that can result from an over rigorous approach to research that relies on the “clumsiest, least relevant research tools at our disposal” (Wood 2012: 17). Excellent research, he claims, must go beyond rigour. As an alternative, Wood advocates finding alternative ways of thinking and understanding rigour. He hopes for a more creative research culture, and explains how this “means re-connecting many different ways of knowing, thinking, imagining, acting, feeling, doing and making” (Wood 2012: 17). A potential model for this approach can be found in *Life of Breath*, a 5-year research project (2015-2020) led by Dr Professor Jane Macnaughton (Durham University) and Professor Havi Carel (University of Bristol), funded by the Wellcome Trust. [9] This project assumed a multidisciplinary and multimodal approach to explore breathing and breathlessness and illustrates how alternative modes of research can reveal new understanding about a pressing contemporary healthcare concern. Researchers were drawn from a wide range of disciplines: medicine, philosophy, anthropology, arts, and literature, with creative writing research practice featuring as an important strand of the project. [10]

Thus, creative writing research has the potential to engage in different ways of knowing, in contrast to research that uses conventional qualitative and quantitative approaches. As Neale claims: “artistic practice is an undoubted route to knowledge” (Neale: 49). In addition, the Arts and Humanities Research

Council (AHRC) confirms that arts and humanities research “nurtures creative and analytical talents” and “brings this knowledge to public use, and makes the human world a richer place in which to live.” (2013: 4) Creative practice researchers are recognised here as key to bringing new insights into the wider world, such as in the *Life of Breath* project. On the other hand, a further definition of rigour from REF2021 appears to stifle these creative talents:

[Rigour is] the extent to which the work demonstrates intellectual coherence and integrity, and adopts robust and appropriate concepts, analyses, sources, theories and/or methodologies. (REF 2019b: 35)

The language used in this definition reduces research to a logical, unified, and consistent way of thinking. There seems little room here for veering, unmooring, or knowing through uncertainty, movements that permeate the creative writing research practice described in this article. Despite this insistence on rigour, the current reading and writing of *Index Cixous* is working “in line with prevailing disciplinary norms and standards” of its field, as outlined in “The Concordat to Support Research Integrity” compiled by Universities UK (2019: 6). Importantly, it employs methods appropriate to the disciplinary field of creative writing, and is therefore rigorous. Cixous’s reflection on the writing process is crucial here in establishing a key characteristic of this field:

writing is not arriving; most of the time it’s *not arriving*. One must go on foot, with the body. One has to go away, leave the self. How far must one not arrive in order to write, how far must one wander and wear out and have pleasure? One must walk as far as the night. One’s own night. Walking through the self toward the dark. (1993: 65)

The creative writing research methods employed are rooted in wandering, not arriving, and veering, and hence rooted in the “norm and standards” of its field.

If any further evidence were needed of the rigour of this multimodal creative writing research practice, we might look to the most recent QAA Benchmark Statement for Creative Writing (2019). Although the benchmark statement relates to undergraduate degrees, it is nonetheless a pertinent document for thinking about the field of creative writing in

all areas of the academy. Firstly, the benchmark establishes that creative writing is “an academic subject in its own right, methodically independent of English or other ‘parent’ subjects” (2019: 4), affording creative writers autonomy in their research practice within the departments that house them. It goes on to explain that “creative writing is founded on the understanding of imagination as a vital mode of perception and enquiry” (2019: 4), therefore endorsing the contribution to knowledge production made by creative writers and their necessity in the academy. The example of creative writing research described in this article seeks to offer new ways of understanding a world-wide healthcare concern. The emerging multimodal creative and critical and creative-critical artefacts are the research, in the sense of Davey’s “concretisation of what is grasped” (2006:5), sharing what has been understood, at an early stage of the project, about a singular lived experience of myopia. This multimodal creative writing research practice uses imagination and language and a continual making and working out to offer new insights into this condition.

In addition, the practice of “besideness” inspires a mode of encounter that brings the researcher alongside, rather than above, the texts and forms it explores, nurturing a more compassionate engagement and response. Researching “beside,” like the rhizome, is a non-dualistic and non-hierarchical practice and requires us to pay careful attention to multiple elements, rather than the binary oppositions that often occupy our thinking. An effective creative writing research practice that explores myopia while also thinking about “besideness” broadens and deepens our understanding beyond the dualisms of seeing “well,” or seeing “badly,” or the “functioning” or the “mal-functioning eye.” More than ever, this seems to be a necessary approach relevant beyond the limited scope of this article. As we move into 2021 in the shadow of a global pandemic, economic hardship, political upheaval, human-induced climate change, and a worsening mental health crisis, insights from scholar-practitioners through multimodal creative writing research that fosters “besideness” has the potential to impact how we understand the world and how we live within it.

Finally, a multimodal creative writing research practice that veers between and sits beside creative, critical, and creative critical writing compels us to move between registers and modes of address within the academy and beyond it. Crucially, veering

as a research practice can lead to “unexpected, even unheard-of orientations” (Royle 2011: 9) and different ways of knowing that can make an important contribution to our world. Therefore, in closing this article, it seems fitting to conclude by veering, “think[ing] afresh and otherwise” (Royle 2011: 7), passing from one state to another, slackening the rope and sitting beside a creative reflection on the movements that have, to date, characterised this multimodal reading and writing of *Index Cixous: Cix Pax*.

Letting Out the Line [11]

Deflected like a braided waterway,
veering round islands sculpted by
silt. Grains of gravel, pebbles, sand,
mud and clay untie you, leave you

in strands, contents spilt. Channels
criss-cross, seeping like ink marbling
paper, and plot new tidal flows.
They fuse with the cadence of your
heartbeat: translations of yourself
you couldn't know. Just beside here
you tip into another elsewhere, sink
slowly, lost in metres of depth, aching
for air, hollowed out, light-headed,
shingly-eyed, until astonishment
comes again.

End Notes

[1] Sections of this article have their antecedent in a conference paper delivered at *Critical Reinventions* hosted by University of East Anglia (12 May 2018). The aim of the conference was to “mark the diversity of formal inventions in contemporary literary-critical practice”: <https://www.uea.ac.uk/literature/news-and-events/events/critical-reinventions>. [accessed 12 June 2020]

[2] For an example see Dixon's PhD thesis (2017), *Fitting manifestations: epiphany in Alice Oswald, Kathleen Jamie, Liz Berry and Joanne Dixon*, available via The British Library e-theses online service (EThOS): <https://ethos.bl.uk/OrderDetails.do?uin=uk.bl.ethos.765550>

[3] For an example see Hannigan's PhD thesis (2020), *Journeys in search of travel writing: a critical-creative interrogation of contemporary travel writing as a genre*, available via EThOS: <https://ethos.bl.uk/OrderDetails.do?uin=uk.bl.ethos.811595>

[4] Davey draws on philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer's concept of understanding as being inseparable from application in *Truth and Method* (1960).

[5] My emphasis.

[6] Cowan provides a detailed account of Professor Birch's document, and while there is not space here to discuss all its implications, it would be valuable to explore further this document in relation to REF2021 and the experiences of creative writing practitioners in UK institutions.

[7] “Transcripts from Samsung Smartphone Voice Recorder” is an unpublished poem written during the UK-wide Covid-19 lockdown, which coincided with writing this article.

[8] The text version of the poetry film, “Thumb Cinema” (<https://www.joannedixon.co.uk/>) is included in the Appendix in the event of the online version being unavailable. The online version gives a more complete picture of the creative writing research practice and its multimodality.

[9] Details of the *Life of Breath* project can be viewed at <https://lifeofbreath.org/> [accessed 1 January 2020].

[10] Examples of how creative writing practice contributed to the *Life of Breath* project can be viewed at <https://lifeofbreath.org/?s=creative+writing> [accessed 1 January 2020].

[11] “Letting Out the Line” is an unpublished poem by the author and appears in the creative component of her PhD thesis (see note 2).

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Appendix

Thumb Cinema

With four fingers on the cover,
my thumb at the final face
by the shoulder, the pages curve

like the crown of a tunnel.
A quick release back
to front relieves the spine,

animates one face, opens out
onto many. The leaves purr:
verso, recto, verso, recto —

an index of eyes, darting
down-wards, side-wards, slant-wards.
Her chin tilts up, levels off, drops.

Her head is sometimes cocked,
rarely in profile, the nape hidden.
Her mouth smiles, puckers, takes

a lopsided view. Stalling here
a meteor shower arrives, written
in skin-creases from the corner

of her eye; one ray refracts up.
The target of her gaze: *blanco*,
colourless, shining – her lips part

to say what about this blank page?
That it keeps a secret, found
by writing with our eyes closed

shut, descending to where
not-seeing matters - in doubt,
in danger. Is that the shape

of your mother-from-before?
Your imperfect corneas blurring
her face until your noses touch.

Then a splitting-off, into a world
restored by a surgeon's precision.
Now two others: a seen-her,

a seeing-you. Or is it the shape
of woman-ironing? Double-headed *
– one head forlorn, resigned,

sagging over her task, the other
flung back, a pencil-sketch bellow
in the space in between, unseen

in Picasso's finished piece, **
where her anger is inside, invisible.
Has that before-woman gone?

Your glasses rest
on the bedside table, lenses
speckled with perfume droplets,

skin cells, dust. Myopia
has returned to her tribe
and you mourn

the not-seeing of her,
the not-knowing of her.
Stolen from you by "seeing

-with-the-naked-eye".
Your lips part: "close your eyes
find the trace, the before-writing

the woman on this blank page".

* *Pablo Picasso (1904), Etude pour "La Repasseuse", Paris, Musée Picasso*

** *Pablo Picasso (1904), "La Repasseuse", New York, Guggenheim Museum*

About the Author

Dr Joanne Dixon is a poet and lecturer in creative writing at De Montfort University Leicester. Her poems, under the name Jo Dixon, appear in a range of publications, including *New Walk*, *The Interpreter's House*, *Furies* (For Books' Sake), *In Transit* (The Emma Press, 2018), *South Bank Poetry* and *Places of Poetry: Mapping the Nation in Verse* (Oneworld, 2020). Her debut poetry pamphlet, *A Woman in the Queue*, was published by Melos Press in 2016, and her first collection, *Purl*, was published by Shoestring Press in 2020. An article on Alice Oswald can be found at C21: Journal of 21st Century Writings: <https://doi.org/10.16995/c21.588>. Dr Dixon reads her work across the East Midlands and in 2018 she visited Estonia to read her poems at the Crazy Tartu Festival. She has worked on poetry projects with Bilborough Sixth Form College, Nottingham Contemporary, St. Ann's Allotments and UNESCO Cities of Literature in Poland, Estonia, Ireland and the UK.